



The Ames Intelligencer

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FACELIFTS ON MAIN

by Sharon Wirth

Editor's note: In 1990 the City of Ames contracted with a consulting firm to survey the historical and architectural resources of Ames. The consultant found the community to be very rich in historical and architectural resources. Unless otherwise specified the consultant's report is the source of information for the following article.

What are your impressions of downtown Ames? Do you find it unusual and distinctive? Historical consultant, Will Page views it that way. He says, "The Ames Central Business District is unusual among many Iowa downtowns because of the radical rehabilitation commercial buildings underwent between the 1920's and 1950's. During this period, Main Street Ames was transformed from a commercial district dominated by Victorian-influenced design to a district characterized by

simplified, efficient, no-nonsense facades. Because this transformation was so universal in Ames, the central business district retains a unified feeling of design. This makes the district distinct" (pp. 5-6). This article will help you see downtown Ames in a new way.

The report uses the phrase "Facelifts on Main" to refer to this architectural transformation. The buildings express the vigorous commercial life driven by conservative, no-nonsense business leaders such as Wallace Greeley, Parley Sheldon, A.H. "Fred" Munn, C. G. Lee, Joseph Budd, John Stevens, Edgar Stanton, and others. While many Iowa communities have examples of 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s architecture in their business district, they are usually interspersed among the Victorian-influenced architecture. In Ames this commercial style of architecture dominates the building facades. Although simplified in design when compared to Victorian architecture the buildings are rich in details through the varied use of brick coloration and texture. Details are also found in cast concrete.

The 1916-1917 construction of the Sheldon-Munn Hotel resulted in relocation of the business hub to the corner of Main and Kellogg. The hotel was a joint venture of Parley Sheldon, H.L. and A.H. "Fred" Munn. Sheldon, who owned the Story County bank, relocated his bank to the Sheldon-Munn site when the hotel opened. Commercial and political rival, Wallace Greeley, moved his bank, the Union National Bank, across the street from the hotel. Sheldon, the perennial mayor, was known for his many years of public



These buildings in the 300 block of Main, on the north side, feature a cast concrete string course at the bottom and top of the windows. The string course is a band extending the entire length of the building. This adds a horizontal feeling to the building. Another important design element found on these buildings is paired windows.

service, having served as mayor for 18 years over a 32-year period. Greeley, known for his philanthropy in the community donated the hospital in his wife's name; his wife donated the land where the public library was built. Greeley and Sheldon were responsible between 1915 and 1920 for the construction of three major buildings which still dominate downtown Ames today. These buildings set the tone for the future construction in the central business district.

The hotel provided Ames with a convention and community center. It was the social center of Ames, providing an elegant setting for afternoon tea dances and banquets with eight course dinners. The Sheldon-Munn building, designed by the premier architectural firm in Iowa, Proudfoot and Bird, uses brick for both structural and decorative purposes. It features a richly textured and colored brick surface, and simple rectilinear shape. With over



The Sheldon-Munn, at the northwest corner of Main and Kellogg, is one of the 3 major buildings which moved the focal point of downtown Ames to the corner of Main and Kellogg. In terms of size, form and mass it is the most complex historic commercial building in Ames. With over 60 windows on the Main Street facade, the light brick framing around the windows is a major decorative detail.

60 windows on the Main Street facade, the enframed windows are a major decorative detail on this building. Light colored bricks, dramatically contrasting with the darker-colored brick walls, frame the windows on the second, third and fourth floors. In February of 1927 an addition was completed giving the building an even more monumental and impressive appearance. During your next visit to downtown Ames take a look at this magnificent building from diagonally across the street so you can focus on the entire building.

Under the leadership of then Mayor Parley Sheldon, the construction of a new city hall at the corner of 5th and Kellogg also took place in 1915-1916. Architectural firm Liebbe, Nourse and Rasmussen designed the new municipal building. This is one of the few remaining resources calling attention to the role of local government in Ames.

A new Masonic Hall located at the corner of 5th and Douglas was constructed in 1916. Liebbe, Nourse and Rasmussen designed the building commissioned by Wallace Greeley. The building encompassing 413, 417, and 427 Douglas (now familiar to us as the Octagon building) features multi-colored brick in tones of orange and brown with cast concrete trim. Originally it was occupied by commercial stores on the first floor, the Tilden Manufacturing Co. on the second floor and the Ames Masons on the third floor. Cast concrete pilasters frame the entry way and windows of 427. The building is an outstanding example of an architect-designed building in downtown Ames.

These three architect-designed buildings led the way in the "Facelifts on Main" movement transforming the appearance of the central business district from Victorian-influenced architecture to the commercial style of architecture. An outgrowth of Prairie School architecture, this style is noted for structural brick walls; clean, rectilinear shapes; and richly textured surfaces of the exterior walls. Local contractor-builders in Ames employed similar details in remodeling jobs through the 20's and 30's transforming the streetscape. Local business people with conservative tastes continued to finance such designs after this architectural influence peaked in many communities. The result is the unified feeling of design (especially

seen on the less-altered second story) found today in downtown Ames.

The commercial style of architecture as practiced in Ames developed a number of architectural elements which were repeated again and again and over a long period of time. This article will highlight five of those elements to assist the reader in understanding the architecture in downtown Ames. These five elements are parapet panels, string courses, polychrome, window enframements, and paired windows.



The parapet panel, the area above the second story windows and below the top of the building, is a major architectural element in downtown buildings. The Odd Fellows Temple parapet panel, 225-227 Main, features brick work patterning at the top with diamond-shape panels below the patterned strip. An additional detail on the building is the cast concrete name plate found between the second and third stories.

The parapet panel was widely used. The parapet panel is the area above the upper floor windows and below the top of the building. Within this area a variety of detailing is found including complex brick patterning, enframement techniques, and color variations. The use of these three details in various combinations results in a group of buildings rich in detailing. A good location to see this detailing is in the 200 block of Main Street on the north side. The buildings from 209 to 227 illustrate designs ranging from simple panels with protruding brick outlining the panel to complex designs including basketweave and checkerboard detailing within the panel.

Another architectural element of interest is the string course. These are bands that extend the entire width of the building facade and may be of the same material or a contrasting material as the exterior walls. This adds a horizontal feeling to a building. The gas company building (131 Main) at the northeast corner of Main and Douglas provides an outstanding example of this detailing. Not only does the string-

course wrap around both building facades (Main Street and Douglas Avenue) but the building design includes three string courses. Sometimes the window sill and/or lintel are extended across the entire building facade. This may be done with brick, as is the case at 131 Main, or a contrasting material may be used. An example of contrasting material is the cast concrete found at 313-321 Main.

The third design element is polychrome, the use of varying colors to add surface interest to buildings. This can be achieved in a variety of ways. The building at 209-211 Main (now Pure Gold Night Club) uses a variegated light colored brick for walls and a dark colored brick as an accent. The recently renovated building at 327 Main (formerly the Fastco building) uses different colored bricks within the exterior wall body. Another variation is the use of contrasting material with brick. An example of this is the building occupied by Fashions on Main and Brown's at 323-325 Main. Here cast concrete is used with brick.

A fourth element, enframed windows, are frequently found in the commercial style of architecture. This might be of the same or of contrasting brick as the exterior walls. The most extensive use of this detail is found on the Sheldon-Munn building. See photo, p.1.

The fifth design element is paired windows. Found on the second story, an outstanding example of this detailing can be found from 313 to 325 Main, Cook's Emporium to Brown's Shoes. Other places to see this are the Douglas Avenue facade of the gas company (131 Main) and the Lechner Building at 208 Fifth Street.

This is a brief overview of design elements found in Downtown Ames. More details can be found in the consultant's report. The report also provides details about the transformation of Ames from a pioneer village to a modern city. A copy of the report is available at the Ames Public Library or the Ames City Hall, Planning and Housing Department. Published in August of 1992 it is entitled "Historical and Architectural Resources of Ames, IA; Volumes I and II."

❖ FACES AND PLACES ❖

Editor's note: This issue continues with FACES AND PLACES, a feature begun with the last issue of this newsletter (Winter, 1994). In this section you will find fun and fascinating facts about places, people, and names you've heard of and how they relate to the early days of our community. This issue's feature was written by Kathy Svec.



Parley Sheldon known as the perennial mayor, was instrumental in the building of the Sheldon-Munn.

SHELDON-MUNN

The Sheldon-Munn Hotel is named for the businessmen who financed its construction.

Parley Sheldon was a native of Ohio and a Civil War veteran when he moved to Iowa in 1874 to farm. He and his wife Frances moved to Ames in 1882 and Parley traded livestock

until 1890 when he purchased the Story County Bank, located at 131 Main (Iowa Electric). In 1917, he teamed up with lumberman H.L. Munn to build a badly needed first class hotel for the city of Ames. The new City Hall at 5th and Kellogg had just been opened, residential construction was booming and Ames was entering a notable period of growth. Parley moved his bank into the hotel in space now occupied by Hair Professionals. Eventually, Story County Bank merged with Wallace Greeley's Union National Bank to become Union Story Trust and Savings, which became United Bank, and now is Firststar. Parley was distinguished for his public service, and was elected mayor in 1884. He served as mayor for 18 of the next 32 years, influencing among many other things, the development of the municipal light and power plant, the Ames and College Railway (the Dinky) and the locating of the Highway Commission (now the D.O.T.) in Ames. He passed away in 1932.

Hiram Lester Munn was a native of New York and also a Civil War veteran. In 1886, he and his wife Phoebe settled near Iowa City and opened a lumberyard. In 1891 they decided to move further west, but only got as far as Ames, where several persuasive locals convinced them it was a good place to re-open their business. Their first yard was at Duff and Main where the business is still located. Since 1891, five generations of Munns have headed the company: Hiram Lester, Alfred Herschel (Fred), Hiram Axtel, Alfred Homer (Fritz), and today Erik. H.L. is remembered as an Ames capitalist involved in many enterprises, including interest in the Sheldon-Munn Hotel along with his son, Alfred Herschel (Fred). At one time, the lumber company had yards also in Gilbert, Slater, Huxley and Kelley.

The family's residence at 726 Duff is a notable home which was originally a Victorian and then remodelled when the Prairie Style became influential. H.L. was 80 when he died in 1920.

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327 MAIN STREET

The re-opening of 327 Main represents a fine example of sympathetic re-use of an older structure. When Beth and Larry Johnson of Ames purchased the building, they felt it was important to enhance the existing architectural features of the building. The new canopy and entryway reflect lines and forms in the existing facade. On the interior, metal ceilings on the upper and lower levels were also saved.

Financed by Max Dutch, a building permit was issued on September 26, 1928. Ben Cole was the general contractor, who also built the first McFarland Clinic on 5th Street and the current City Hall (formerly Ames High School) but is best known for his work on the Grand Avenue underpass. The cost of 327 Main was \$30,000 and it was designed by Clinton Kowgill, an Iowa State architectural engineer, who incorporated Art Deco details in glazed tile, brick and concrete. The strong vertical feel of the design is unusual on Main Street, but typical of the Deco style. The first business to occupy the space was Montgomery Ward. The location of a national chain store on Main Street was a significant indicator of growth in the central business district. When Wards moved to South Duff in 1964, Fastco Drug moved from 411 Kellogg to the Main Street address which they occupied until closing. The building is now home to Irene's Boutique (women's clothing) and American Country (Shaker style furniture and accessories).



The building at 327 Main has recently undergone a renovation and has reopened to house American Country (shaker style furniture) and Irene's Boutique (women's clothing.) It features unusual cast concrete geometric panels on the upper front of the building.

THE MUSEUM DREAM

Thank you, thank you and thank you to Bill Allen and Marv Walters. Marv has recently offered secure, temperature-regulated space to store Ames history related items that have been collected by the Ames Heritage Association. This is very critical to the future establishment of a museum. The securing of a storage location allows the Association to accept donations while working toward the realization of a museum. If you or anyone you know has items relating to Ames history they would like to someday see in the museum please contact Kathy Svec (232-4877) or Lois Vohs (232-4294).

Bill Allen generously donated his time and talent to framing in and hanging a door so our storage space is secure and separate from other entities located in the building. An energetic crew of Kathy Svec, Sharon Wirth, Lois Vohs and Bob Vohs gathered one Saturday morning to clean the space, construct a work table, and build shelves. Documents and historical materials are now being relocated to this central space so that they can be inventoried and catalogued.

For several months now, Mary Carr and Kathy Svec have been sorting and organizing collections and files accumulated by Farwell Brown in an attempt to understand what is included in the materials so that everything can be catalogued and inventoried. This is part of the work that must be done in preparation of making a long talked-about museum a reality. The ad-hoc committee formed by the Ames Heritage Association and the Ames Foundation is studying and exploring what is involved in setting up and running a museum. This planning and inventoring is a very important step in formulating a museum project and will be a critical factor in the success of any future project. If you would like to get involved or offer any input please contact Lois or Kathy as listed above.

DONATIONS NEEDED

The Bauge House Restoration Project needs your help to continue moving forward. Currently we are focusing on finishing the lean-to area of the house. Donations of used brick are needed to build two chimneys, one for the kitchen area and another in the living room area. Several hundred bricks will be needed. If you have or know of someone else who has used bricks they would do-

nate to this historical project please call Sharon at 233-2415.

In the fall we are planning a work day to lay flooring and build a wall between the kitchen and bedroom. We have secured some salvaged pine flooring. Still needed is tongue and groove boards in 4 to 6 inch widths about 8 feet long to build the wall. If you know of a source, ideally old material suitable for reuse, or if you

Association Officers

President Kathy Svec
603 Grand Avenue, Ames
232-4877

Vice- President Don Faas
4419 Ross Road, Ames
232-1613

Secretary Nancy Osborn
312 Hayward, Ames
292-8531

Treasurer Bill LaGrange
2800 Torrey Pines Road, Ames
292-4131

Editor Sharon Wirth
803 Burnett, Ames
233-2415

The Ames Heritage Association, a legally incorporated, not-for-profit organization is dedicated to promoting interest in local and state history through educational publications, programs and displays. The board meets the third Monday of each month. Interested persons are always welcome.

The Ames Intelligencer, named after an early community newspaper, is published three times a year. Questions may be directed to Sharon Wirth, editor (phone 233-2415).

can volunteer time and labor we would love to hear from you. This is an unusual opportunity to be involved hands on in an historical restoration. Contact Sharon if you can help.

The Ames Intelligencer
Ames Heritage Association
P.O. Box 821
Ames, Iowa 50010

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Ames, IA 50010